IN THE GIPSIES' VAN

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IN THE GIPSIES' VAN

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"ALICE WAS BENDING OVER THE LAD WHO SEEMED TO BE MOST HURT"

IN THE GIPSIES' VAN

OR, CAUGHT IN A TRAP

A Story for Boys

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"HOW THE STRIKE BEGAN"
"GYTHA'S MESSAGE"
ETC.

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CHAPTER I

Brother and Sister

"AUNTIE, there are three letters for you this morning; I saw the postman give them to Robins as I came through the hall."

"My dear, it was very rude of you to look what was going on in the hall. If Robins has got any letters for us he will bring them in all in good time."

"But I do want to hear how Mamma is," said the little girl, slowly taking her seat at the breakfast table, but looking very wistfully at the door while her aunt handed her a cup of coffee and an egg.

"A letter for little missie, ma'am," said the old butler, when the door was at last opened, and he came in with his silver waiter and two letters on it, which he handed to his mistress.

"Oh, Auntie, a letter for me!" exclaimed the girl, jumping up from her seat at the breakfast table and running round to her aunt's side.

"Alice, go back and sit down. Really I cannot think what has come to the children now," she said, turning to her sister; "we were never allowed to behave in such an unruly fashion. Ladies should always be quiet, and restrain themselves from rude impatience," she added.

"Oh, I will! I will, Auntie!" said Alice, with the tears shining in her eyes; "only I do want my letter. I never had a letter before, and I wonder who can have written to me."

Without further comment Miss Lester

handed her the letter and she opened her own, exclaiming as she did so, "It is from Edward, I can see."

After reading the first page of her letter Aunt Mary dropped her hand to her side and said, with something like a gasp, "Edward wants to send John to us while he takes Mildred abroad for her health!"

"But, my dear Mary, what could we do with him?" said Miss Nancy Lester, who, although the younger of the sisters, was herself a lady of middle age, with no liking for children.

While her aunts sat looking at each other, wondering what they had better do, Alice was reading the following letter:—

Dear Lal,

It is joly fun, I am cuming to stay with you and Aunt Nanny. Mammy is obliged to go away, and papa says he wants me to stay in the place where he was a littel boy. I am to go to scool, but we can have sum fun if I do, and there will be holideys *sometimes. Is there any rats and mols, an bats, like there was when dad was a littel boy. He says it is fun to live in the cuntry in a old house. You can give my luve to Nanny and Polly if you like.*

Your luvin brother,

JACK.

Alice was delighted with this letter, but she did not know whether she ought to hand it to her Aunt Mary or put it into her pocket without asking her aunts to read it, for she had a dim idea that they might not like Jack to call them "Polly" and "Nanny", although they were the names generally used by her father when speaking of them at home.

But the ladies did not notice the little girl's perplexed look as she folded her letter and put it into her pocket, for they were as deeply engaged considering their own.

At last, with a deep sigh, Miss Lester said:

"I suppose we shall have to take charge of John for a little while at least, for Edward seems to take it as a matter of course that he should come to us;" and then turning to Alice she said: "I have had a letter from your father and he is to bring your brother to-morrow. I hope he is a very quiet boy, who can behave as a gentleman should, for we are all ladies here, and not used to have anything rude or rough about us."

"I—I don't think Jack would be rude or rough, Aunt," said Alice, a little colour stealing into her cheeks as she laid her hands upon the letter in her pocket.

The little girl was asked a great many questions about her brother, which she answered truly enough from her point of view, for "dear Jack" was perfect in his sister's eyes, and so Miss Nancy was considerably relieved to hear what a nice boy Jack was.

When he arrived the next day with his father his aunts were more than ever willing to accept Alice's account of him, for he was a fair, blue-eyed lad, something like what his father had been at his age, and looked gentle and docile.

Before Mr. Lester returned to London he made arrangements for his son to attend the grammar school as a daily boarder.

"I will take care that he does not mix with rude, rough boys, Edward," said his sister, for she hardly liked trusting her nephew, with his gentle, refined face, among the boisterous crowd she had seen rushing about the playing-field at the grammar school.

Miss Nancy had suggested that he should share Alice's lessons, and she should teach them both.

But Mr. Lester had shaken his head and laughed at the suggestion. "That would never do for Jack, thank you all the same, Nanny," he said.

When the carriage drove away, bearing her father to the railway station, Alice drew her brother into the garden that they might have a little quiet talk to themselves before they entered upon their new life here at the Grange.

"I say! my aunts are dreadful fidgets, aren't they?" said Jack, slipping his arm round her waist as they walked into the shelter of the holly walk.

"Hush, Jack! they mean it all for kindness, you know," said Alice, fearing her aunts might overhear his words.

"Oh, yes! I dare say they do; but they ought to understand that a fellow don't want to be coddled up like a girl. And I shall let them see I won't have it. About the rats—have you heard anything about them?"

"Rats!" repeated Alice, with something like a shudder; "why, I think Aunt Mary would faint if she thought there was one in the house!"

"Papa says there were lots about here when he was a boy—and moles too. Haven't you seen any?"

"No, I haven't thought about them.

Perhaps there might be some in the garden."

"Papa said he thought Aunt Mary would let me keep some pets in the barn, and he gave me some money to buy what I liked—some rabbits, and a guinea-pig, and a rat. A tame rat, I mean; one that would sit on my shoulder and creep up my sleeve."

"Couldn't you make shift with me till we go home again," said Alice. And then her aunt called them to go in to supper.

"We will breakfast at a quarter to eight in future, Robins," said Miss Lester; "and after breakfast I shall require you to walk with Master John to the school." The lady said this as the children went in to the dining-room.

"Oh, I shall know my way, Aunt. Papa showed me this morning," said Jack.

"Robins, you will attend Master John as I order," said Miss Lester.

"Yes, ma'am," said the old man as he withdrew.

Jack scratched his head, and looked ruefully at his sister, as he said:

"Is old Robins to be a sort of nurse, Aunt Mary?"

"He is to attend you to school, of course. I could not allow you to mix with those rude, rough boys. You must remember you are my nephew, and we are Lesters of The Grange."

Jack was afraid he should never have a chance of forgetting this, if old Robins was to be in attendance upon him always. But he managed to subdue his anger and go quietly to bed; but the prospect of having to walk to school with the old butler beside him was anything but a pleasant one.

However, when the morning came, and the two set off together, the boy speedily forgot his ill humour in listening to the old man's talk about his father and grandfather; for Robins had lived at The Grange for nearly fifty years, and to him there was no family in the county to be compared to the Lesters.

"You helped Papa to tame a rat, didn't you, Robins?" said the boy.

"Ay, and fine fun we had with it too!" said the old man, chuckling.

"Could you get one for me, and make it come and eat out of my hand like Papa's did? You see I know all about that, for Papa has told me."

But the old man shook his head. "There ain't no rats about our place now, I do hope, for my ladies would never rest in their beds if they thought there was one in the place. No, we had 'em all cleared out years ago."

"Oh, what a pity!" said Jack, in a disappointed tone.

This talk helped to pass the time as they walked to the school, and Jack bade his guardian "Good morning" at the school gate, and quite forgot to be angry that he had walked with him.

CHAPTER II

Old Robins

When Jack came out of school at the close of the afternoon, he saw to his dismay that old Robins was waiting for him on the opposite side of the road, facing the school gate. He had made the acquaintance of two lads during the day, and was now talking to them about the lessons to be prepared for the following morning, and he was afraid they would see the butler in his oldfashioned livery and ask him some questions about why he was there. But to his great relief he found that they lived nearer the town, and so turned in the opposite direction, which left him free to walk over to Robins when most of the crowd of boys had started homewards.

"What have you come for?" he asked, rather sharply.

The old man looked surprised at the question.

"Didn't you know, Master John, that I was ordered to attend you to school?"

"Yes, but I don't want you to fetch me home as well! What do you think the other fellows will say if they see you dangling after me as though I was a girl and you were my nurse?"

"Well, sir, it's my orders, and I must obey them," said the old man.

"I don't want to hurt your feelings, you know, Robins; I shall like to come and talk to you about my father sometimes when we are at home; but what do you think the other fellows at school would say if they knew you were sent to fetch me home—a great fellow like me?" he said, drawing himself up; "it won't do, you know, at all, and I shall tell Aunt Mary so when I get home!"

"Yes, sir. But suppose Miss Lester

says it is the proper thing for a young gentleman like you to be attended by a servant of the family? I can't say I won't come!"

"I suppose not," fumed the boy; "but if you must come, I hope you won't stand like an image in front of the school gate any more."

"Where shall I wait, sir?" asked the old man meekly.

"Oh, anywhere, so that you're out of sight. I'm going on now to have it out with my aunt;" and flinging his satchel towards the old man he raced on. Finding a garden gate open he turned in there and almost ran against his sister, to whom he poured out his grievances at once.

"What do you think the other fellows will say if they see old Robins fetching me home?" he demanded.

"Poor Jack! I knew you would not like it, and I tried to say something to Aunt about it to-day, but she says you do not know anything about this neighbourhood, and she could not think of letting either of us go about by ourselves. Aunt's maid is to go with me if Aunt cannot go herself," added Alice.

"Oh, yes! that's all right and proper for a girl, of course," said Jack fretfully; "but boys are different, and she must let me go to school by myself. Why, there's no sense in it. I've run off now and left Robins hobbling up the road with my satchel. I threw that at him when I ran off, because I thought she might like it better if he carried my books."

Alice sighed as she looked at her brother's angry face. "I will do what I can, Jack. But you see Aunt is so kind, and studies us so much. Papa said he could not leave England with an easy mind unless we were here, so I think, for his sake, we ought to put up with some things that we do not like."

"Oh, yes! with some things," assented Jack, "but not to have a nurse. That's what the other fellows will call him, I know, if they see him. Promise now, Lally, that you will get Robins ordered to stay at home. You have been here longer than I have, and you can coax people better than I can. Tell Aunt it hurts my feelings to have Robins sent to fetch me."

Alice laughed at her brother over this, but she promised to do what she could on his behalf, and then persuaded him to go indoors and wash his face and hands, and change his clothes, so as to be presentable in the drawing-room.

But Alice had no good news for him when he entered the room before going to bed.

"I had a long talk with Aunt Mary, Jack, and I told her how you disliked having Robins fetch you home from school. But it was of no use. She said she had to make changes for our sakes on account of Papa wishing us to stay here, and we could not expect to have everything our own way."

"But didn't you tell her the other fellows would laugh at me if they found out about it!" said Jack hotly.

"I told her everything I dared," said Alice; "but she says she must protect you from the rude, rough boys who go to that school, and——"

"Oh, bosh! She would like to teach me at home with you, I suppose. Ask her if she wouldn't like to put my hair in curl-papers?" and Jack flung himself out of the room and stamped across the gallery to his own.

The next day Robins was waiting for him when he started for school, and his mistress had evidently spoken to him about the matter of keeping Jack close under his charge, for as soon as they started, he said:

"Now, Master John, you won't try to run away from me again, will you? I am sure you would not like to get me into trouble with your aunt, and Miss Mary is a very particular lady."

"But look here, Robins. My aunt does not understand. I went to school in

London by myself, and why shouldn't I go here?"

"Why, Master John, there are often gipsies about in the woods," said the old man in an impressive tone, as though he was very much afraid of gipsies himself.

But Jack burst into a loud laugh. "Why don't you say 'Black Bogie' will have you? Suppose a gipsy was to stop us now! What could you do? Why, if it came to a fight I should have to take care of you and pitch into the gipsy," said the boy. "No, no, Robins, that won't do! But I tell you what. If you'll promise not to come farther than the turn in the lane, and keep out of sight of the other fellows, I'll see if I can put up with it. But, mind! you are not to come close to the school gate as you did yesterday, for if you do, I'll run away altogether and find my way back to some friends in London."

As he intended, this threat frightened the old man, and he thought he had better yield to the boy's demands to keep out of sight of his companions, rather than, obeying his mistress to the very letter, drive the boy into doing something desperate.

So this compact was made with the old butler. He was to walk to a certain spot in the lane and wait there for Jack, and he was not to go farther than this same place in the morning, though he might stand and watch him until he was out of sight.

This plan answered very well for a few days, and Jack, remembering that Robins was waiting for him, did not stay long in the playing-field after school was over. But as time went on, and he made more friends among the boys, it was not so easy to tear himself away from them the moment he was free.

"What's your hurry, Lester? We want you to hear what Tom Dacre has to say about forming another cricket club. Wait a bit, we shan't be long," said some friends one day.

So Jack waited, and got so interested in the noisy discussion going on that he quite forgot old Robins, and the old man grew so alarmed lest some accident had happened to the boy that he ventured to walk up to the gate and enquire if anyone had seen Master Lester.

"Have you come to fetch him?" said a mischievous-looking boy.

"Yes, sir," answered Robins; "I hope no accident has happened to him."

"Oh, he's all right!" said the boy; and then he joined another and pointed to Robins as they turned and went back to look for Jack.

"I say! look here! Lester's nurse is at the gate waiting for him. Go and tell him his mammy wants him," they said to another boy.

The third boy was not at all averse to delivering such a message, and so Jack, in the midst of a noisy argument, was suddenly stopped by this lad shouting at his side:

"I say, Miss Lester, your nurse has come, and can't wait for you any longer!"

Jack knew too well what he meant, and

his eager face grew pale as he turned once more to the argument and pretended not to hear the interruption. But it was of no use, "Lester's nurse" was shouted by half a dozen voices at once, until at last the boy grew so angry over his friends' ridicule that he set his back against a wall and offered to fight any boy that ventured to repeat the objectionable words.

The tumult was quelled somehow, without any blows being struck that day; but Jack felt as though he would like to fight the old butler when he went to the gate and found him still waiting there.

"What an awful muff you are, Robins, to come to the school after me when I told you to keep out of sight!" he exclaimed.

"But, Master John, you were so late!" said the old man, in a deprecating tone.

"Suppose I was! Couldn't you wait a little while until I came to you. A nice life I shall have with those fellows now!" he groaned.

"They would never be so rude, Master

John. I am sure the one who asked me if I had come to fetch you spoke civilly enough."

"Oh, yes, I dare say he did—to you!" said Jack, boiling over with wrath, and wishing he could shake the old man for his folly.

"I was truly afraid something had happened to you, Master John," he said.

"Gipsies, I shouldn't wonder," said Jack, mockingly; and then he walked along in silence, too angry to talk to the old man as he usually did.

CHAPTER III

Trouble Ahead

"OH, Jack, what is the matter? Whatever makes you so late?" Alice ran to meet her brother with this question as soon as he appeared at The Grange, but for answer he pushed her aside rather roughly, and ran upstairs to his own room.

"Why is your brother so late, my dear? Did he tell you?" asked her aunt the next minute.

"No, Aunt. Boys are late sometimes," she added, trying to make light of the whole matter, and so screen her brother from further questioning upon the subject.

"Ah! He has been kept in because he did not know his lessons, and yet he refuses to let me help him with them," said Miss Nancy in an injured tone.

That her nephew was safe, however, relieved her mind, and she left Alice by the window, looking into the garden, and went to join her sister.

As soon as tea was over, his aunt said: "Now, John, make haste and get your books, there has been a great deal of time wasted already, and I hope you will not get into disgrace again at school."

"Who said I had got into disgrace at school?" demanded Jack in angry scorn.

"Why were you so late if you were not kept in? I have been talking to Robins about the matter, and he says you were not at the school gate for some minutes after he got there."

Miss Lester, in her extreme care for her nephew, was determined to find out, if she could, why he had been detained at school, and, at length, after a good many questions had been asked about his lessons, he told her he had stayed talking with some of his schoolfellows about the cricket club.

"But you had nothing to do with that. It was no business of yours!"

"No business of mine, Aunt? You don't understand. At boys' schools the boys themselves manage such things as cricket clubs and football clubs."

"Pray, do not mention a football club in my presence, and, of course, we could not think of letting you join a cricket club while your parents are out of England."

"Not—let—me—join—a—cricket—club!" slowly gasped Jack, as he sat and looked at his aunt.

"My dear boy, you could not expect us to allow such a thing? You seem to forget that you are left in our care, and that we are bound to protect you from all danger as far as possible; and cricket being a very dangerous game, we should not be doing our duty if we allowed you to take part in it."

"You seem to forget that I am a boy!" burst out Jack in his anger.

"You don't let us forget it," said the

lady significantly. "We are constantly anxious about you, for we never know what danger you may run into."

"But, Aunt Nancy, you can't really mean that you won't let me join the school cricket club? My father used to play cricket when he was at school."

"Yes; and received several dangerous blows with the ball. Once his thumb was put out of joint. My sister and I were only talking about it yesterday."

"But his thumb was mended again: it is all right now," said Jack.

For a boy to talk so carelessly as this of such a serious accident convinced Miss Nancy more firmly than ever that he was not to be trusted amid such dangers as playing at cricket would involve; and she told him so.

Jack protested that there was very little to fear in a fair game of cricket, and at last, in sheer despair, asked her what she did intend to do with him.

"To take care of you, of course," said

the lady a little stiffly. "You and your sister are left in our care, and I trust we shall be faithful to the charge your parents have entrusted to us, and that you will not seek to make our task more difficult."

"I am sure I have tried to please you, Aunt," said Jack, almost crying with vexation at the thought of not being able to join the school cricket club.

As usual he went to his sister with his trouble.

"Poor Jack! I wish Aunt didn't feel so anxious about us over everything," she sighed.

"Oh, it isn't that! she just likes to vex me, I know," said the boy angrily. "What am I to tell Dacre and the rest of the fellows to-morrow, about this cricket club? Of course I promised to pay my subscription at once, and now, I suppose, Aunt won't let me have the money. Can you lend it to me?" he suddenly added.

But Alice shook her head. "I don't think I ought to do that until Aunt gives her consent. I will talk to Aunt Mary about it to-morrow, Jack, and see what she says. Sometimes she is easier to persuade than Aunt Nancy. I will try for your sake, dear, for I know you don't care about walking or driving out in the carriage, though I should like it; for it is rather dull with only Aunt Mary or Aunt Nancy to talk to all day."

"So it is, Lally. And if you'll only persuade Aunt to let me go and play cricket sometimes, I will go with you in the carriage sometimes, just to cheer you a bit."

So the brother and sister parted for the night, each feeling a little comforted, though Alice had but a slender hope of altering her aunt's opinion about cricket. But Jack built his hopes on his sister's powers of persuasion with his aunt, and set off to school in the morning feeling quite sure that he would be able to get the cricket club subscription the following day.

There was the annoyance of Robins walking with him to school, and he expected there would be some teasing and chaffing again to-day over what had occurred the previous afternoon, but he was not prepared for the storm of jeering and laughing that greeted his appearance among his companions when he reached the gate.

He had given offence to one or two lads the previous day by something he had said, and one of these called out: "Here's Miss Lester. She has run away from her nurse, and her aunt will put her in a corner when she goes home!"

Jack turned crimson with anger, and shook his fist threateningly at the offender, but attempted to run toward the school.

But other boys came flying forward, and one called out: "Auntie's pet, mother's darling."

"Who curls your hair, Miss Lester?" asked another.

"Does your nurse bring a feeding-bottle?" asked a third boy, when he saw how the chaff annoyed Jack.

"Look here, you fellows, I'll fight the whole lot of you after school," sputtered Jack, for he was too angry to speak plainly.

"Better do it now, Miss Lester," said a little fellow dancing before him; and there might have been a fight in the playground there and then, but the captain of the school made his appearance among them at that moment, and as fighting was strictly forbidden, the crowd quickly separated.

But the senior boy, who was responsible for the behaviour of the boys on the playground, was not so ignorant of what had been going on as he appeared to be, and just before they went into school he drew Jack aside, and said in a low tone:

"You are a new boy, and may not know the rules. Fighting in the playground is severely punished. Mind I have warned you now!" And then he went away, leaving Jack with anything but a comfortable feeling as to what might happen when school was over in the afternoon.

Of course, the wisest thing he could have done would have been to get out of school as quickly as possible, and make his way home.

But this is seldom a schoolboy's way of getting out of a difficulty, at least a boy like Jack, and so he went to join the group of boys who were again to discuss the cricket club, and was again greeted as "Miss Lester", but managed to control his anger, in view of the more important matter under debate.

Before the meeting closed he had his name set down as a member of the new cricket club, and promised to bring his five shillings subscription the following day, never doubting but that Alice would succeed in persuading his aunt to let him do this.

He quite forgot the lapse of time, until the turret clock gave warning for half-past five, and then there was an instant scattering of the crowd of boys, and Jack went tearing down the lane, thankful that Robins had not made his appearance at the gate.

The poor old butler could not walk so fast as Jack could, and so they only reached home when the stable clock was striking six; and the two elder ladies looked very stern, and Alice very anxious and wistful, when he presented himself at the tea-table.

"I am very sorry to be so late, Aunt," said Jack as he took his seat.

"What excuse have you to offer, John?" said Miss Lester rather sternly.

"Only that I stayed to talk with some other fellows in the playground after school. We must talk sometimes, you know, Aunt," he added. And as he spoke he tried to read in Alice's face the fate that awaited him.

"I do not see the necessity at all for you to stay and talk to these boys," said Miss Lester stiffly.

Jack felt hurt and angry, and strongly inclined to retort. He was, therefore, in no mood to take patiently the news that Alice gave him when they went upstairs.

"Aunt won't hear of it, Jack," she said

sadly, in answer to his question about the cricket club.

"I see you're all determined to make me miserable. The fellows call me a girl now because Robins is sent with me to school, and you and Aunt are going to try to make me one;" and with a sigh he went to his own room and shut and locked the door.

CHAPTER IV

A Fight and its Consequences

Miss Lester's objection to her nephew playing at cricket was not entirely unreasonable, for Jack was a delicate lad, and looked even more fragile than he was; but it is very doubtful whether the most tiring game of cricket would have done him as much harm as the constant fume and fret that his aunt's care of him induced.

It seemed as though they were at cross purposes, and while each was trying to please the absent parents, their methods were likely to cause a good deal of needless anxiety.

Jack was in such a turmoil of anger and unhappiness when he went to bed that he could not sleep, and really looked ill the next morning.

Miss Lester noticed this as soon as he appeared in the breakfast-room, and at once decreed that he could not go to school that day.

The boy was not very sorry to hear this, for he had a headache with trying to think what he should do, after promising to join the club, to let his schoolfellows know that he could not keep his promise.

He ate very little breakfast, and when it was over he lounged away into the garden, and tried to talk to the gardener about moles and rats.

So the day passed sadly enough in enforced idleness and vain repining against his aunt's prohibition of cricket, and he was not much more cheerful when he set out for school the next day.

There was trouble awaiting him there with the masters, for he had been absent for a day, and had forgotten, if he knew, of the rule that a written explanation of absence should be brought from the parent or guardian or there was a punishment imposed.

But the worst trouble came when school was over in the afternoon, and he had to tell his schoolfellows that he could not join the cricket club after all.

"His aunt won't let him," said one.

"She's afraid he might rumple his hair!" shouted another.

"Girls ought not to want to play cricket," said a third, with a mocking laugh. "Miss Lester, I am surprised at you;" and the boy mimicked his aunt's manner to the life, and made Jack furious.

What he did or said he scarcely knew, for he struck out right and left at his tormentors, without much regard to whether his blows were deserved or not; and presently one boy's nose was bleeding, another was sent backwards to the ground, and Jack found himself fighting his way to the school gate. His face was streaming with blood, and he just had time to see that the captain of the school had come to quell the disturbance, when he reached the gate and dashed out and down the lane, to the trysting corner where Robins was awaiting him.

But before he reached the bend in the lane from which this point could be seen, he turned so sick and faint that he crept through a gap in the hedge, to rest and recover himself, and remove some of the traces of the fight. Blood was dripping from his nose, his necktie was undone, and his jacket torn, while he had lost his cap in the fray, so that to appear before Robins in this plight would frighten the old man terribly.

So Jack sat down a little way from the hedge and leaned his head against a tree, but had scarcely done so when the shouts of boys running down the lane apprised him of the fact that several of his schoolfellows had set off in pursuit of him.

The sound gave him strength to get up and walk farther into the wood, for he was in no mood to renew the fight, or to be dragged back to school; so he made his way farther in among the trees and brushwood, while the boys rushed on until they met old Robins waiting behind a tree, as Jack had directed him to do for the future, after that unfortunate visit to the school gate.

"Hullo! you're waiting for Lester, aren't you?" said one of the boys who had seen Robins at the gate and recognized him again.

"What have you young gentlemen been doing?" said the old man, looking round for Jack, but evading their question.

"Why, we want Miss Lester. The captain of the school is waiting for him just up there. Where is he?"

"He hasn't come out of school yet, I fancy," said the old butler.

"Oh, that's all moonshine! You know better than that. Which way has he gone?"

"I haven't seen him, so he can't have

come out of school yet," persisted old Robins.

The boys looked at each other and held a whispered talk for a minute among themselves, and then one exclaimed:

"Yes, that's it! He's gone round the other way!" and they tore off, leaving Robins considerably mystified, for surely Master John would not attempt a three-mile walk to avoid meeting him; and it was quite three miles to The Grange if he went through the town, which was the only "other way" by which he could hope to reach home.

The noise of the boys' shouts died away in the distance, and all was quiet again. Then Robins began to fear that Master John must have been foolish enough to go round by the town, and how angry his mistress would be with both of them when she knew it. He had made up his mind that Jack would be home first, although he had walked round through the town, and so his surprise may be imagined when he reached the gate and saw Miss Lester, with her garden hat on, waiting for him.

"Robins, where have you been? Where is my nephew?" asked the lady severely.

"Hasn't he got home yet, ma'am?" said the old man, in a flutter of fear.

"Were you not sent to bring him home?" demanded the lady.

"Yes, ma'am. But I have not seen him," said Robins, speaking as quickly as he could.

"Dear me, Robins! what has happened to you? Have you been down to the alehouse in the village, and forgotten all about Master John?"

The old man looked at the lady indignantly.

"I have never given you cause to say such a thing of me, ma'am. I believe Master John has walked home through the village so as not to meet me, for he does not like it at all."

Miss Lester felt slightly taken aback by the old man's words and manner; but she felt anxious about Jack, yet wanted to hide the fear she felt concerning him.

"Auntie, hasn't Jack come home with Robins?" said Alice, who came up at this point.

"Robins says he has gone round through the town, and that is a walk of three or four miles, so that he may not be home just yet if he has gone so far."

Alice placed herself at the window to watch for her brother, and Miss Lester moved about uneasily from room to room, listening with eager attention for the sound of the door bell. But the minutes dragged on until an hour had passed, and then Miss Lester summoned Robins to her presence.

"Master John ought to have been here by this time, even if he walked quite slowly round by the town," she said.

"Yes, ma'am, he ought," said Robins. "Shall I go to the school and ask if he has been kept in for staying at home yesterday?"

"But I kept him at home, Robins, and so surely the master would not punish him for that!"

"There's no telling what they might do if it was the rule," said the old butler; "I only thought of that a few minutes ago. I wish I had thought of it when I saw the other young gents in the lane, but I was wondering what they could have wanted him for."

"They couldn't have known he was kept in if they came to ask you about him," said Miss Nancy.

"No, ma'am, they couldn't. But I'll go now at once and find out all I can about him, and I hope I shall bring him back or find him here when I come."

Robins was not long in getting into his coat, and he went up the lane quicker than he often walked, but it was some time before he could make himself heard at the school. For he stood ringing the bell at the gate, and it was not until someone came past and told him he ought to go round to the master's house that he discovered that the gate bell rung in the playground, and was scarcely likely to be heard from the house.

Mr. Denman, the master, came to speak to Robins, but he could give him no satisfactory information about Master John Lester.

There had been some trouble in the playground after school was over, he knew, but Lester had gone before the news reached him, and so punishment awaited him for breaking rules and fighting in the playground. "I expect he has gone home with one of his schoolfellows. There were several of them involved in this fight, and it is very likely one of them living near has taken him to his own home that Lester may put himself straight and wash his face, for I hear his nose was bleeding when he left."

Robins hurried back home, hoping he should hear Jack's voice calling him "an old simpleton" as he had often done; but there was only Alice with an eagerly whispered, "Where is he?" when he went in at the servants' door, and he scarcely had the heart to say, "I haven't heard anything of him at school."

But it had to be said when he reached the hall, where the two elder ladies were waiting for him.

He told them what the master thought—that Master John had gone home with a schoolfellow to spend the evening. He did not tell about the fight in the playground, for fear of adding to their trouble, but assured them that the master thought he would be sure to get home very soon—that he had become interested in something and forgotten the lapse of time, but that he would be home before bedtime.

But bedtime came without bringing any news of the missing lad, and then Robins was sent to fetch the village constable, that he might go to the town and inform the police authorities there of what had happened, and if possible cause enquiries to be made among those who attended the town grammar school.

It was after midnight before the summons was obeyed, for the constable had gone to bed before Robins reached his cottage, and it was after one o'clock in the morning before he had received Miss Lester's directions about the search to be made for her nephew.

Alice had been put to bed, worn out with grief and anxiety, but the two elder ladies did not go to their room at all. They had some tea brought to the library, as being the most cosy room, and a fire was lighted there that they might hear a knock if the police were successful in their search and gained any tidings of him before the morning.

It was a miserable time for everybody, for the two sisters were wholly unaccustomed to anything that could disturb the even tenor of their lives, and consequently were the less able to decide what ought to be done in such an emergency.

CHAPTER V

A Mysterious Disappearance

When Jack crept through the gap in the hedge, to hide in the coppice, he had no intention of staying long, but he was determined not to be dragged back to the school in the plight he then was.

He had picked up his satchel and overcoat, which his aunt had insisted he should wear when he went out in the morning because it was raining a little, so that, encumbered with these in his arms, he could not go so fast as he would have liked. Therefore, by the time he had dragged his way through the brambles and undergrowth to the shelter of a little dell, his strength was wellnigh spent, and he was glad to throw himself down for a rest as well as to hide from his schoolfellows.

He could just hear the distant shouts occasionally, but he soon began to feel drowsy, and he put on the overcoat and placed his books in a position where he could use them for a pillow, intending to rest there until the hunt for him was over, when he would creep out and make his way home, though what his aunt would say when she knew that he had been fighting he scarcely dared to think.

But the mental excitement he had passed through, added to the bodily exertion, was too overpowering for him to think much, or even to listen long, and he was soon fast asleep, for it was a quiet, sheltered corner, protected from the wind, and warm and cosy. In spite of the morning shower it had been a bright sunny day, and the moss and dead leaves retained the warmth, and so made a comfortable resting-place for the boy.

It was altogether too comfortable, as it proved, for when Jack next opened his eyes it was quite dark, and silence seemed to have covered the wood as with a curtain.

He started up on his elbow, thinking he was in his own bed at The Grange, until his hand touched the sharp spines of a bramble, which speedily brought to his recollection where he was. Then he sat up, rubbed his eyes, and wondered how he should find his way out of the wood in the dark.

Just then a distant church clock broke the solemn silence that brooded over the place. Jack counted two strokes, and then waited for more to follow, but no more came.

"Two—two o'clock!" he said half aloud; "why, it must be morning;" and he shivered half with cold, half with awe at being in the solemn darkness.

When he again opened his eyes it was with a wondering sensation of where he could be, for this world of the wood was all alive now. Feathered and furry creatures all around were busy in search of food, and Jack sat watching them, perfectly entranced. All the stories his father had told him of the ways and habits of these woodland creatures occurred to him, and he forgot the punishment that surely awaited him when he returned to school.

Presently the sun began to mount higher in the heavens, and as Jack raised his head to notice this, he saw at a little distance a man gathering up a net that seemed to have been spread out upon the ground on the farther side of the dell. The man saw him almost at the same moment, and he at once came across to make a closer acquaintance.

"What are you doing here, youngster?" he said, in a rough voice.

"Well, I've been watching the mice and things scrambling for their breakfast. What are you doing with that net over there?" he asked.

"Well, that ain't none o' your business, youngster, I likes the animals about here as well as you do—likes to watch 'em," said the man with a knowing smile.

"Do you, indeed? Can you tell me something about them?" said Jack eagerly.

The man seated himself on the little slope, and picked a blade of grass, which he proceeded to chew, while he told Jack something of the habits of squirrels, rabbits, moles, field mice, and other creatures who made their home in the woods. "I've got a whole happy family of 'em at home," said the man at last; and then he proceeded to question Jack, who told him freely enough all that had happened at school the previous day, and how angry his aunts would be when they heard about it.

"Well, now, for a spirited chap like you that ain't nice. It ain't likely you're going to put up with it. It 'ud do very well if you was a gal, but being what you are, why, of course, you ain't a-going to take it quietly no longer."

"But what can I do?" said Jack, opening his eyes in some wonder.

"Do? Why, for a chap like you, that loves animals and likes to watch 'em there's always plenty to do, if they know how to set about it."

"Will you tell me, please?" said Jack rather eagerly; "for I can tell you I don't want to go back to my aunts if I can help it, or to school either. For what's school without cricket, or——"

"You come to school to me, and let me teach you a bit about moles and suchlike. That's the school that 'ud suit you, I know. Where did you say your father was, youngster?" And as he spoke he looked more closely at Jack's clothes, especially the handsome overcoat that lay on the grass near him. He had been out all night poaching in these woods, but he saw a chance of doing a little of another sort of poaching, if he could only persuade Jack to fall into the trap he was preparing for him.

Jack did not think he had mentioned his father, and he looked up quickly into the fellow's face. "My father?" he said.

"Yes, yes; out with it, youngster. Your father ain't about here. You see I belong to the wise folk, so it ain't any good trying to hide things from me. He ain't about here, and more than that, he wouldn't like it if he knew you was put upon by these aunts. He'd like you to know all about animals, and live a free life, and get strong and rosy, and you ain't likely to do that where you are."

Jack looked at the man in amazement. How could he know so much about him and his father's wishes. He forgot how often he had mentioned his father when talking about the animals, and how he had told him this and that about them. So he only stared in open-eyed wonder and fascination as the man proceeded to tell him what a happy life he would live in the woods all through the summer, if he liked to join him and some friends who had pitched their camp a mile or two off for the sake of the sport they could get here.

"I could go back to Auntie when I liked, of course," said Jack in a hesitating tone, as if balancing the matter in his mind.

"Well, you can walk, I suppose, youngster?" said the man; and Jack laughed at what seemed the absurdity of such a question.

"I'll come with you for a day or two," he said, after a minute's consideration. "This row will be about forgotten then, I dare say, and Aunt won't mind me joining a cricket club when she sees I can live in the woods without taking any hurt. You've got some tents, I suppose?" he added, peering between the trees as if trying to see through them.

"Oh, yes! we've got tents, and a good breakfast will be ready for us, I hope, by the time we reach them," said the man, rising from his seat, and motioning to Jack to get up too.

The boy was quite ready for his breakfast now, after watching his furry and feathered friends for more than an hour at theirs, and so he readily picked up his coat and satchel, and prepared to follow the man through the woods.

The two trudged through brake and bramble, getting many a scratch by the way, but Jack felt neither tired nor hungry in the eagerness with which he listened to the many anecdotes his new friend could tell him of the cunning and craft of the woodland animals, with whose habits the man was so well acquainted that Jack could only wonder how he had got all his knowledge.

At last, after walking for more than a mile, they came in sight of a gipsy encampment, which rather startled Jack, and his step visibly slackened, but his friend would not notice this. He slipped his arm in Jack's, and said:

"You're hungry, and tired too, youngster, but we'll soon have some breakfast;" and then he shouted to a woman who was carrying a pail of water, but Jack did not understand what he said.

He saw now that there were tents, and several covered carts, besides one or two regular gipsy caravans, and there were horses and dogs, and dirty, half-dressed, unkempt children strolling about the encampment, which did not look at all inviting to Jack, now that he was close to it.

But his new friend led him to one of the gipsy caravans, and a breakfast was soon prepared for them. Coffee, and bacon, and new-laid eggs were set before them, and though the coffee might not be so good as that served at The Grange, Jack was not fastidious this morning, and breakfast served under the branches of a wide-spreading oak, with the sunlight filtering through the leaves, and playing hide-and-seek among the rough breakfast things, was a novelty sufficient to atone for a good many deficiencies. So Jack made a hearty meal, and, after a wash, left his coat and books in the caravan, and wandered into another part of the wood with his friend, who seemed to have nothing to do just now but tell stories of his experiences among the wild creatures whom he seemed to understand so well.

But although Jack was almost unconscious of being himself questioned, the man had got out of him by midday all there was to tell concerning his friends and relatives, where they lived, and who they were; and having thus satisfied himself that they were people of means, who could pay a handsome ransom for the boy by and by, he formed his plans accordingly. When night came a very comfortable bed was made up for Jack in one of the caravans, and before he went to rest a good supper of broth and stewed rabbit was set before him, of which he ate very heartily, then undressed and crept into the little bed provided for him.

He had not had a chance of thinking of his aunts or sister during the day, for he had not been left to himself for a minute, but before he went to sleep he had formed a strong wish that he had not come to this gipsy camp, for he was afraid Alice would be greatly troubled about him. But there was not time to think of this or anything else for many moments, for his head seemed to grow heavy all at once, and he was asleep almost immediately.

When Jack returned to consciousness it seemed to him that the night must have been a very long one, and yet he was being bumped from side to side of his little bed, while his bedroom seemed to be bumping over a rough, stony road. His head was aching terribly.

But in spite of the headache and the jolting, he either went to sleep or sank into a state of unconsciousness again, for when he next came to himself the van was dark, except for the light of a candle that was held close to his face, while a woman bending over him held a cup to his lips.

"Come, come, try and drink a sup o'

this tea," she said, in a rough but kindly voice, and Jack, once roused up, drank it eagerly enough.

"Where am I?" he asked, rubbing his eyes and looking at the woman, and then round the queer bedroom on wheels.

"Well now, you're with friends, if you're only quiet, and do as you're told."

"But you've been moving the van. It shook me awfully," said the boy.

"You've been dreaming," said the woman, with a short laugh. "Movin' the van, indeed! Where do you think we should want to move it?"

"I don't know, unless it was to take it out of the woods that were close to the school."

"I tell you you've been dreaming. There, lie down and go to sleep again until the morning, and then you'll see for yourself, perhaps, that we're in the forest still."

Saying this the woman went out and shut and locked the door, leaving Jack to ruminate in the dark over the queer fix his own folly had brought him into.

His head was less painful, but he could not think long before it began to ache again, and his thoughts were most confused. He found he could recollect nothing of what had passed since he had been in this gipsy van, although it seemed to him that a very long time had passed since he left the school with a bleeding nose and swollen face. He meant to get out of this as quickly as he could now. As soon as it was light, and they unlocked the door of the van, he would start off home, and tell his aunts that he was very sorry he had not come straight home from school with Robins.

He wished he had got some money with him, though, to pay these people for their trouble, and the food they had given him. He did not think he had eaten much or been ill long, and he was sure his aunts would pay them, and he would tell them this before he left, for he did not want to act meanly in the matter.

Jack again tried to form some estimate of the lapse of time, but could make nothing of it, and at last fell asleep, full of the determination to set off on his walk home as soon as he got up the next day, little dreaming what a bitter awakening awaited him in the morning.

CHAPTER VI

In Captivity

When Jack woke up the next morning, he looked round the van, feeling sure that he had heard the click of the door, but there was no one to be seen, and he sat up in bed, deciding that he would get up and dress himself, and then start on his journey homewards.

But he saw that on a stool beside him there was a jug of coffee and two thick slices of bread and butter, which made him feel certain that he had heard the door fastened, and he got out of bed at once and went across to make sure that he could open it.

But he found, to his surprise and dismay, that it was securely locked, and all the rattling and pushing made no impression, nor did anyone come when he called, although he shouted himself almost hoarse before he reluctantly returned to the bed, where he sat down and ate some of the bread and butter.

He had also made another discovery that had startled him very much. Instead of his own fine white linen shirt, he was now wearing a coarse ragged coloured one that was much too large for him, and his other clothes were nowhere to be seen, although he remembered taking them off when he first came to sleep in the van.

What could have become of them? And why was this ragged shirt put on him in place of his own? What did the gipsies mean by such a strange proceeding? Hungry as he was it almost took his appetite away to think that he might not be able to start at once for home, and he commenced a search for his clothes, peering and feeling in every nook and corner, until at last he was convinced that they were not in the van, but must have been taken away while he was asleep.

Then he mounted the stool and tried to open one of the little curtained windows, but found that it was not made to open. He could see, however, that they were in the midst of trees, and so he hoped they were still in or near the same wood, close to The Grange, so that it would not take him long to reach home if he could once get his clothes and escape from the van.

Once more he went to the door and began beating upon it with his fists, but though the noise he made sounded loud enough to himself, it did not disturb anybody else, for no one came in answer to his knocking and calling, and at last, worn out with the exertion, he threw himself upon the bed and burst into a storm of sobs and tears.

He had plenty of time to regret the folly he had committed of walking into this gipsy trap, for nothing disturbed the quiet that seemed to have settled down upon the place except his own noisy attempts to obtain release, and the hard names he called himself aloud for getting into such a fix.

He had time for this, and to ponder over all the circumstances of the last few weeks, and he saw now that he had been an absolute coward to run away from school as he had done.

The day seemed to be of interminable length, and not a sound broke the dreary silence until it was nearly dark, and he was almost asleep from sheer weariness of thinking over his misery, when he heard a stealthy footstep outside the door, and in an instant he was awake. But he determined to lie still for the present, and watch what his visitor would do before deciding what he should attempt.

Presently the door was pushed open very carefully, and a woman came in, bringing some food and a jug with tea or coffee.

She looked at him for a moment in the

waning light, and then went on tiptoe towards the door.

But before she could reach it Jack had sprung out of bed and reached the door first, and with one bound he was out on the grassy turf below. The woman ran after him, shouting "Tom! Tom! the boy! the boy!" But Jack darted away and ran with all his might down one of the more open alleys of the wood. It had evidently been an old bridle path in former days, but was now grass-grown, and so afforded little obstruction, and the boy rushed on with bare feet and the ragged shirt fluttering in the wind. "Help! help!" he called as well as he could; and oh, how gladly he would have welcomed old Robins if he had only appeared down one of the paths that crossed this old bridle-road!

But only the echo of his own cry was heard at first, and then the sound of footsteps following him, and a rough, hoarse voice calling "Stop thief! stop thief!"

As the sound grew clearer Jack's strength seemed to get less, and just before the man reached him he stumbled and fell all his length along the path, striking his head against a stone. The man almost fell over him.

"Get up, you fool," he cried in an angry tone. "Where do you think you could go in that rig? Get up before I make yer," he added, with an angry oath.

Poor Jack slowly picked himself up. He was faint and spent now, for he had had nothing to eat since the morning, and blood was trickling from a cut on his forehead, where he had fallen against the stone.

"Didn't I say as yer was a fool to try runnin' away from me," said the man, when he saw the blood trickling down the boy's cheek.

"What right had you to lock me up in that van and take my clothes away?" said Jack, as soon as he could speak.

"Why, I wants to find yer friends, of course," said the man.

Jack looked up at him incredulously. "Find my friends!" he repeated. "I can find them for myself when you give me my clothes and let me out of that van."

"Ah, yes! but who is to pay us for all the nursin' and doctorin' you've had since you've been ill. A pretty penny you've cost us for doctor's stuff and what not; but your father will square it all, I expect, like a gentleman, when he gets home from foreign parts."

Poor Jack could only limp along by the man's side, lost in wondering amazement. Had he been ill, and nursed by these gipsy people?

He had lost all count of time certainly; but what could the man mean by saying his father was coming home? And he managed to ask him this question at last.

"Aye, he'll be coming home fast enough, I reckon, when he gets the letter I sent him, telling him as how a young gent as had a pocket-book, with the address on that letter writ inside it, was picked up ill, and had been off his head ever since."

"But I wasn't ill when I met you!" protested Jack with a shiver, for the evening air was cold, and his single garment was very little protection to him.

"Well, yer can tell him what yer like when yer see him, but I thought, and my Polly thought, yer was ill enough, and yer 'ave been trouble enough, and expense enough, one way and another."

Jack was puzzled, but at length he said: "Well, I am sure my father will pay you for all this. But there is no occasion to wait for him to come from Switzerland. Let me go home to my aunt and you will have the money at once. My aunt is Miss Lester of The Grange."

"Oh, yes, I know her! She's no friend to us poor folk—won't let us pitch in her wood for a single night if she can help it," said the man, with an angry growl.

"But you are not far from her wood, are you?" said Jack, a little anxiously.

The man burst into a loud laugh. "Am I a sheep?" he said, when he could speak, for Jack's question seemed to amuse him immensely. "We're nigh on a hundred mile from them there blessed old woods," he said with a chuckle. "Oh, we've took good care of yer, and give yer change of air and everything else as gentry wants."

Poor Jack listened in dismay, for what chance had he of making good his escape if he was a hundred miles from home. Then, too, he was puzzled about this story of his illness. Had he been ill? His memory was by no means clear on this point, in fact it was very confused. He only recollected the pain he had suffered in his head, and the growing consciousness of the jolting of the van over a rough road. But how long these things had lasted he had no means of judging, so that he could not contradict the man's statement, and the only possible plan seemed to be for him to wait until his father arrived, or wrote an answer to the gipsy's letter sent to the address in Switzerland.

His father had written this address in the pocket-book himself, in case Jack should wish to write to him about anything, and the recollection of this brought to his mind another aspect of his folly in taking the course he did.

If he had only written calmly to his father, asking him to give his consent to him joining the school cricket club, he felt sure now that the matter would have been arranged to his satisfaction.

The thought had crossed his mind to do this, but he was too impatient to wait for a letter to reach his father, and the necessary time for an answer to be returned. He wanted the matter settled out of hand—at once—without any delay, and a pretty settlement he had made of it in his folly and impatience.

He had plenty of time to think of all this as he slowly dragged his tired limbs along beside the gipsy. He scarcely needed to be told to go back to bed in the van, for he was too much exhausted to think of anything but rest, and too cold to wish to lie on the bare ground all night. So he meekly crept up the steps into the van and laid his tired limbs down on the bed in the corner, and from sheer heart-sickness and despair burst into tears.

He was too tired to eat at first, although he felt faint and sick from his long fast, and then the race in the chill evening air with only an old shirt to cover him; but the bed was fairly comfortable, and there was a blanket and coverlet, so that he soon began to recover from his chill, and he was able to eat what had been brought for him.

The next morning when he woke up he found that the van door was ajar, and by his bedside was an old jacket and a pair of trousers, but they were not over clean and very ragged, and so he decided not to put them on, but to wait and see if he could not obtain his own clothes.

Presently the door was pushed open, and a head appeared a little way above the level of the floor. "Going to get up, lad?" said the man who had caught and brought him back the previous evening.

"When I can have my clothes I will," said Jack, rather sullenly.

"Them are good enough for this 'ere place," said the man, nodding towards the jacket and trousers lying on the floor.

"They're dirty and ragged," said Jack in a tone of disgust.

"All right, go without 'em! I'll fetch your breakfast," said his visitor cheerfully; and he shuffled off, and presently returned with some coffee and bread and butter, and a tame squirrel sat on his shoulder.

Jack's eyes brightened at the sight of the little animal, and when the man offered to leave it, the boy was delighted, and eagerly promised to take care of it. Playing with this tame creature reminded him that if he only went outside he might see many a pretty sight, and learn a good deal about the ways of the wild creatures living in the wood, and the thought of this overcame his disgust at the dirty clothes. So he got up and put them on, and, taking the squirrel in his arms, went down the steps and out into the wood.

He soon found that the regular encampment was only a little way off, but before he had gone half a dozen yards, the man who regarded him as his property placed himself by his side, and at once began talking about the squirrel, and from that to the habits of other woodland creatures, which he knew would interest Jack. He was smoking a dirty, short pipe, but took it from his mouth occasionally to speak to Jack, and give him some piece of information about the ways and habits of the birds and animals that found shelter here.

After listening to him for some time, Jack sat down, for he found he could not walk far without feeling very tired, and after they had sat for a few minutes, he said:

"Now, will you tell me what you want to keep me here for?"

"Bless you! Didn't I make it plain enough to you last night! I'm just waiting for that letter to be answered that I sent to your father. I s'pose it takes time to send to foreign parts like that?"

"How long is it since you posted your letter?" said Jack, a little anxiously.

"Well, it must be nigh upon a month now," answered the man. "I thought—"

"A month!" repeated Jack; "have I been here as long as that? Why didn't you send and tell my aunt that I was ill?"

The man shook his head and laughed. "That wouldn't have suited our book at all!" he said. "You forget you fell ill on our hands, and we've got to get back the money it cost to make you well again!"

"I can't understand about being ill!" said Jack, with a puzzled look.

"I dessay not. Young gents don't

understand everything, though they do go to school and learn no end of things. It was in your head, too. Maybe when you got that black eye it was done," added the man, between puffs at his pipe.

"I suppose I did have a black eye," said Jack, with a sigh, thinking how much better it would have been to have gone home to The Grange, even with this, than falling into a gipsy trap as he had done.

"Yes, sure enough, you had a black eye; and it must have made your head bad, too, for my Polly will tell you how bad it was, and how you rolled it on your pillow. Oh, yes, yer was pretty bad, and I wished your father would come, I can tell yer! I s'pose yer'll be glad to see him, too," said the man, with a grin, as he looked at Jack's ragged trousers.

"I don't see why you want to wait for my father, now that I am well enough to tell you that I live with my aunt at 'The Grange'. Let me write a letter to her," said Jack, with a sudden ray of hope that he might be rescued at once. "My aunt will be sure to be at home," he added, "but there is no telling where my father may be. He may have left that part of Switzerland because it does not suit Mamma, or she may be ill again, and then Papa would have to write to his lawyers in London, and they are always beastly slow. They wouldn't care that I was stopping here all this time. What is the matter?" he suddenly asked, for his companion had taken his pipe from his mouth, his jaw had dropped, and he looked at Jack in consternation.

"What's that you're a-saying about lawyers?" he gasped. "I don't want no lawyers interfering with me, and I won't have 'em either!" he said.

"I don't want them, I'm sure, but we're pretty sure to have them if my father is busy and can't come and look for me himself; for he believes in lawyers though I don't."

"I tell yer, boy, I won't have no lawyers. Do ye hear? I'll kill yer first, and swear I've never see yer; so, look out yer don't try none o' them tricks with me;" and saying this he got up and told Jack to march before him, back to the van.

CHAPTER VII

At the Grange

WHILE Jack was fretting and groaning in the gipsy van, search was being made for him in every direction, both by the police authorities and Miss Lester's private messengers.

It was not until the middle of the next day that old Robins remembered the talk he had had with Jack about friends in London. As soon as it recurred to his mind, he went at once to his mistress and told her what Jack had said about going to London to some of his father's old friends.

"Go to London! Just because we tried to take care of him—because you walked with him to school!" exclaimed Miss Lester in astonishment.

"I believe the other young gentlemen made game of him about it," said Robins, in an awkward fashion.

"Then they were not gentlemen," said the lady decidedly.

"I thought I had better tell you of it as soon as it came into my mind, ma'am," said the old butler.

"Certainly, Robins, you were quite right, and I will ask Miss Alice at once who these friends are likely to be;" and the interview over with the butler, Miss Lester went into the garden in search of Alice, to question her upon this point.

The girl opened her eyes in amazement when she heard the story Robins had just told his mistress.

"I don't think Jack would ever do such a thing as to run away, Aunt," she said.

But she gave her aunt all the information she could about the intimate friends who lived near their old home, and the gardener was dispatched with telegrams asking whether the missing lad had arrived there, or, if he should do so, that they would at once communicate the fact to his friends in the country.

Having done this, Miss Lester was left to reflect upon the fact that her nephew had not been as happy in his father's old home as he ought to have been, and at last she began to question whether her treatment of the boy in actual practice had been as kind as she had intended it should be.

These reflections rather increased her unhappiness and anxiety, but made her think more tenderly of Jack, and more eager to find him and show him once more that she really loved him.

So, when one telegram after another came from these London friends saying they had not heard or seen anything of John Lester since he left London with his father, she grew more restless and anxious, for there seemed to be nothing else she could do to discover the missing lad.

The police had been set to work, friends all round had been informed of what had happened, and nothing more could be done at present; for, as a letter from a friend of the family in London reminded her, if the boy had very little money in his pocket, and had set out to walk to London, he would be some days on the journey, and there was no telling what hindrances he might meet with on the way, and it would be better to wait and see whether he arrived at any of his friends' homes before sending to his father, though this would have to be done if news of him did not reach them shortly.

No one can tell what the pain of that "waiting" was to the ladies at The Grange. Both ladies blamed themselves now for trying to improve upon their brother's method of bringing up his children; for, whatever its defects might be, Jack would never have tried the desperate remedy of running away, they felt sure, under his father's rule.

Poor Alice fretted herself ill, and her aunts were inclined to go to the opposite extreme now, and, from keeping the little girl too close to her lessons, letting her do just as she liked.

But, fortunately, Alice "liked" to employ her mind, for her father had taught her during a previous time of anxiety, when her mother was very ill, that it would be better to do something—her ordinary tasks, if possible—rather than give up her whole mind to anxious fretting, which would only increase the trouble of all around her.

It was a relief to both sisters when a letter arrived from London, saying that an intimate friend of Mr. Lester's would be with them shortly to talk over matters, and decide what steps ought to be taken next to find the missing lad.

"Oh, I am so glad Mr. Oliphant is coming!" said Alice, when she heard the news. "He is so clever, and knows all about everything. He will know what we ought to do next, Auntie."

A few weeks earlier Miss Lester would have felt somewhat offended at hearing that a stranger could know better than herself what to do in any emergency that affected her own family. But she was learning a lesson just now that she was not likely to forget, and so she gladly welcomed her brother's friend when he arrived.

"He has not gone to London, I am sure, Miss Lester; for I went to the police as well as to friends, as soon as I received your telegram.

"There is one thing which may have happened. He is not very strong, and may have fallen ill by the way, and so I have sent out a circular to all the hospitals and workhouses he is likely to pass on his road to London, asking, if such a lad has been brought to them, to communicate with me here without delay."

"And now what do you think we ought to do next?" asked Miss Lester anxiously.

She was willing to act upon the advice of this friend, whatever it might be.

"I have done all I can in the hope of sparing his father what must prove a terrible anxiety to him, and may do much harm to Mrs. Lester in her delicate state of health; but as a fortnight has now passed, without bringing us any news of the boy, I think we ought to write and tell his parents what has happened."

"Oh, Mr. Oliphant, I dread to do that!" said Miss Lester.

"But it must be done, my dear lady," said her visitor.

At this point Robins came into the room in a bustle of excitement, scarcely waiting to knock at the door, for another telegram had arrived, and each one that came raised the old man's hopes that it might have been sent by Jack himself.

"Dear me! this is from my brother. What can it mean?" exclaimed Miss Lester.

Have received a mysterious letter about

Jack. Where is he? What has happened to him?

Miss Lester read this telegram aloud while old Robins waited near the door.

"Then somebody knows of his whereabouts, if we do not, Miss Lester," remarked their visitor. And he turned to the old man, "Have you written this letter to the boy's father?" he asked.

"Dear me, no, sir! I should not think of doing such a thing unless my mistress ordered it," said Robins, rather indignantly.

"What shall I do about this?—for the messenger is waiting, I suppose, Robins," said his mistress.

"Yes, ma'am; I told him to wait!" said the butler.

"Send this in reply: *Jack has disappeared! Search being made for him. Send on letter, or come if possible.*"

When this message had been sent off, Mr. Oliphant said:

"Now I think we may rest assured that

he is safe and sound somewhere; but in the meanwhile I think I will return to London and see my solicitor. He is Lester's man of business as well, and we may want a man of law in this affair; and if so, and he is posted in all the facts beforehand, we can telegraph for him to come down to us at short notice.

But Miss Lester demurred to this at first. She had been obliged to call in the aid of the local police, but to consult a London lawyer seemed like publishing Jack's disgrace—if he had really run away—and anything that touched the honour or reputation of the Lesters was not to be thought of.

But Mr. Oliphant overcame this objection, and it was arranged that he should return to London early the next morning.

When they were seated at breakfast the next morning he said:

"Could you ladies drive with me to the station this morning? It would be altogether more pleasant if you could, and you might point out to me just where the boys say they saw Jack turn towards home."

Miss Lester looked at her sister and then at Alice.

"Oh, do go, Auntie!" said the little girl.

"Certainly, my dear, if you would like it," said her aunt. And so it was settled that the ladies should dress for the drive as soon as breakfast was over, for it was nearly an hour's journey to the railway station, which lay at the other end of the town.

The morning was bright and pleasant, and Alice felt so sure that Mr. Oliphant would be able to find Jack for them that she seemed quite herself as she chatted to her old friend as they drove along.

They did not forget to point out to him, when they came to the top of the winding lane, that it was there the boys had seen the last of Jack, while Robins, waiting just a little below, had not caught a glimpse of him.

"Looking round here," said Mr. Oliphant, "and remembering what those boys said about the matter, there is nothing but the wood for him to hide himself in."

"There's the gipsies!" said Alice, with something like a shudder, for Miss Lester's maid had succeeded in impressing her with a fear of these mysterious people.

But the gentleman laughed at the notion of gipsies carrying off a schoolboy like Jack, and Miss Lester smiled.

They waited to see the train off, and then it was decided that, having come so far, they should call and see a friend who lived on this side of the town, before returning home.

CHAPTER VIII

Escape

WHAT Jack had said about his father sending for a lawyer to settle the business of his ransom considerably disturbed the gipsy who held him captive, for a lawyer generally meant policemen close at hand.

Jack noticed during the next two days that there were frequent talks with another man, and also with "Polly" his wife; and Jack himself, although he was allowed to leave the van, was not allowed to move far away, and there was no more talk about squirrels and moles as there had been before, but the man seemed to be constantly watching for something or somebody, as he sat smoking his dirty pipe on the steps of the van.

The couple who held him as their property just now were not unkind. They had given him the use of the van for a bedroom and slept underneath it themselves, and Jack could hear the murmur of their voices as they talked after they had gone to bed. And they talked a good deal as it seemed to the listener, and he grew vaguely uneasy, for he knew it was the question of his release that was being discussed, and yet he could not hear a word that was said.

At length he heard a word or two that made him think that the gipsy meant to murder him the next day, and he grew cold with horror for a minute or two. Then as he grew more calm he determined to make his escape if possible, even though he was a hundred miles from home.

He had done nothing all day but lie under a tree and watch the birds, so that he was neither tired nor sleepy, and as the fright had thoroughly roused him, he at once began to plan what he would do.

Until the gipsy and his wife had gone to sleep he must lie perfectly still, that they might think he was asleep too; but as soon as the sound of snoring assured him that they would not hear any movement, he got up and put on the old trousers and jacket, for in the pocket of the jacket he had hidden the stump of an old knife he had picked up the day before, and with this he intended to take out the screws of the lock on the door. The van was not in total darkness, for the moon was almost full and a ray of moonlight fell across the door. To make sure that if a screw fell, or he dropped his knife, it should not be heard underneath, he took the dark coverlet off the bed to stand upon near the door.

He had time to think out all these precautions while waiting for the gipsy and his wife to go to sleep, so that, when at last the snoring gave him leave to move, he lost no time in putting his plans into execution.

The taking out of the screws was a long

and tedious task with his old rusty knife, and while he was doing it he heard a church clock strike twelve, which reminded him of the night he slept out in the wood, and then it struck him that the two clocks sounded remarkably alike, although he was a hundred miles from The Grange and the village church, and he wondered how he should get back, even though he made his escape from the woods.

But the thought that his life was in danger made him resolve to brave this difficulty if he could only make good his escape from the van.

After working for over an hour at the lock he at last managed to draw out the last screw, and then he pulled the door open a little way and peeped out and listened to the sleepers below.

Then he picked up the coverlet and put it across his arm, for if he had to lie down and hide this would help to screen him he thought.

With the utmost care he crept down the

steps, his heart beating so loudly that he felt almost choked.

Having gained the last step he resolved to run to the shelter of the nearest tree and not venture down the moon-lit bridle path.

But he had not gone many steps in the shadow of the trees when he heard a warning "hist" sounded almost at his side, and he drew himself close up to the tree trunk and waited. So did the others, whoever they might be, and then there was a low growl and a dog came sniffing round Jack's legs. But the dirty trousers he wore were a familiar scent to the dog, and so he passed on, to Jack's great relief, for now at a short distance he could just make out the figures of three men, carrying a load of something in a sack.

While they waited for the dog to complete his search he heard one say:

"What does he mean to do about that boy? He sent the letter long ago."

"Yes; and he's going to send the boy

off to-morrow, for it will soon be too hot for us all here if he don't."

And then, the dog having returned to them, they passed on, and when they were out of sight Jack wrapped the coverlet round him in case he should need to hide again without the protection of a tree. Then he made his way along the track the men had come, for he felt sure they had been to some village or town beyond the wood, and so he could not do better than follow in their track.

He had brought an old pair of boots with him, but they were a poor protection from the bramble spines that often pierced through them, so that the progress he made was not very rapid. But now and then he came across traces of this being the road frequently used by the gipsies, and this encouraged him to press on as fast as he could in the hope of reaching some railway station where he intended to ask for the stationmaster, to whom he would tell his story and ask him to telegraph to The Grange or let him have a railway ticket that would take him home. He little dreamed how like a gipsy lad he now looked, and it was well perhaps that he did not consider this difficulty, for he had several miles to trudge before he came near the border of the forest, and he had to hide from real or imaginary dangers a good many times. Jack was hungry, tired, and footsore when he at last reached the coppice that skirted the main road, and having gained this he crept through the hedge and down into the ditch to look round and try to decide which way he ought to take.

He had only been here a minute or two when he heard footsteps coming along the road, and the next minute Dacre, the very boy he had fought with at school, came along, whistling and swinging his satchel.

The sight almost paralysed Jack, and he failed to see or hear that there were other footsteps creeping near him, until a harsh voice cried out: "Here he is, down in the ditch!" and at the same moment two of the gipsies had sprung upon him.

But Jack, too, had time to cry out, and he called "Dacre! Dacre!"

His schoolfellow turned towards him just as the gipsies dragged him out into the road.

"What is it? What are you doing to him?" said Dacre, in a tone of amazement, for he was certain he had heard his own name called.

"It ain't nothing for a young gent like you to trouble about," said one of the men, who was trying to stuff a handkerchief into Jack's mouth to prevent him from speaking again, while the other endeavoured to tie his legs together with a piece of cord.

But Jack fought desperately, and turned such imploring eyes upon his schoolfellow that at last Dacre said: "Look here! if it's all fair and square, you let the fellow speak; don't choke him with that handkerchief."

"He's my own lad, and a thief, and he's run away because I told him I'd give him a good hiding," said one of the men.

"Dacre!" feebly gasped Jack, after another desperate struggle; and then something in the face, despite the ragged clothes, made Dacre think of the missing Lester, and he stripped off his jacket and fought for Jack's release almost as desperately as Jack did himself.

But how the battle would have ended if help had not suddenly come to the boys it would not be hard to say, for Dacre was soon almost blinded and stunned by a blow from the gipsy's fist. He just had time to seize hold of Jack as they were trying to drag him away, when the sound of horses' hoofs was heard coming along the road, and Dacre called out "Help! murder! murder!" As the carriage came in sight the gipsies left Jack, to make good their own escape, and the two boys, who were too much exhausted to try to move out of the way, were flung bleeding and bruised at the side of the road, while Dacre's jacket and books lay in the middle.

"What is it? What is it, Thompson?"

said an alarmed voice, as the carriage drew up and the coachman jumped down from the box.

Jack looked like a dirty young gipsy, considerably the worse for the fight, but it was hard to say what Dacre was like when he slowly sat up and stared at the coachman. His clothes were torn, his nose was bleeding and swollen, and he had rolled over and over in the dusty road in his efforts to reach Jack as they were dragging him away.

"What's all this row about?" said the coachman. "Who called murder just now?"

"I did," answered Dacre, "and I wish you would look after this chap, for if he isn't dead, he has fainted;" and he pointed to Jack, who had not moved or spoken since the gipsy flung him on the road.

"A young gipsy, ain't he?" said the coachman.

"I don't know who he is, but he knows me, for he called me by my name, and I know a fellow who has been missing from our school," said the boy.

"Thompson, come and open the door and let down the steps," said a voice that sounded familiar to Jack, who was slowly recovering consciousness.

"It isn't worth while, ma'am," said the coachman, "it's only a young gipsy, and I expect this other interfered and got the worst of it. We can send the police to see after them."

But Miss Lester insisted upon getting out of the carriage, and she was instantly followed by Alice, who made her way to the lad who seemed to be most hurt.

She was bending over him when the boy opened his eyes and feebly murmured "Alice, Alice!"

"Oh, my Jack! my Jack! my own dear Jack!" cried the girl, throwing herself down in the road and lifting Jack's head into her arms.

It did not matter to her that he was dirty and his clothes ragged and filthy, she kissed and caressed him, and for a minute the brother and sister were oblivious of everything else but that they were together once more.

Dacre was the first to find his voice. "It is Lester, then; hurrah!" and he got up as Miss Lester stooped down to speak to her nephew.

"My dear boy, how did this happen?" she said, looking at his feet, that the gipsies had managed to tie together with the cord.

"I was trying to get away. It was Dacre who saved me, Aunt! He is one of my schoolfellows."

"We must take them both home in the carriage and send for the doctor, Auntie," said Alice, her eyes full of tears.

The coachman speedily cut the cord that bound Jack's feet, but he looked dubious about taking such dirty filthy garments as Jack wore into his carriage, and he drew Miss Lester aside and asked if he should help Master Lester to take them off.

"No, no! my nephew has had to wear them, poor boy. We will take him home as he is, and this young gentleman too," she said, turning towards Dacre, who was trying to remove some of the traces of the fray from his face and clothes.

He had no objection to go with them, for he wanted to hear all that had happened to his friend, but he said he must stop for a minute at the school and ask to be excused, for he had been sent back for a book he had forgotten, or he would not have been near the place where his presence proved so useful.

Dacre did not at all mind going in to see the master, though he was scarcely presentable, but the news he would be able to tell would be a sufficient excuse, especially when he told the master that Miss Lester was waiting for him in her carriage.

Jack had not been able to tell them much about his captivity, except that he had been shut up in a gipsy van most of the time he had been away, but this was sufficient, and the news soon spread through the school that Lester had been carried off by gipsies, as though they were a gang of brigands, and Dacre had fought two of them to rescue him.

The doctor was sent for to see both lads as soon as the carriage reached The Grange, but before he came, Jack had had a bath and changed his dirty, gipsy rags for a decent suit of his own clothes. Then it was found that his captors had darkened his skin with walnut juice, or some other concoction, that he might look more like one of themselves if he should be seen by a stranger.

The doctor examined him, but found very little amiss beyond the recent bruises and scratches. There was no trace of illness, such as the gipsies had told him he had passed through, and the doctor thought they must have given him some drug to stupefy him, so as to gain time for their letter to reach his father, and give some colour to the account of his illness, which they evidently intended to make a pretext for extorting money.

"And you were really such a muff as to go with that man instead of braving it out with us at school?" said Dacre, when Jack was able to tell them how foolish he had been.

"Yes! I know I have been a flat—a stupid muff all through," said Jack, "and all because I hated to say I was obliged to do as my aunt wished. Perhaps she don't understand much about boys, but I know now that she was very kind to me and my sister. And——"

"Why, she seems awfully fond of you!" said Dacre. "I don't think I should mind an aunt being a bit fussy over me if she was really kind—really loved me," said the boy in a softened tone, and Jack saw that the tears were shining in his eyes.

"What is it? We must be friends now, you and I," said Jack.

"Well, I feel as though I should make a muff of myself, for you know that I have no mother or father, only a crabbed old guardian who does not care a straw what happens to me, so long as he is not bothered. And I was thinking I wouldn't mind having your old butler sent after me, if I knew it was because somebody cared enough for me to do it. That's it, you know, Lester; so long as people love and really care for you, if they do, why, they may show it in any way they like, and I shall be glad enough of it."

While the boys were talking, Miss Lester was sending off telegrams in all directions, bearing the joyful news that the prodigal had returned safe and sound, and the next day brought Mr. Oliphant and the lawyer with him to see what could be done in the matter.

But by the time the police were made fully acquainted with all the circumstances, the gipsy and all his friends were miles away. They found the scattered remains of the encampment, and many signs that it had been hastily broken up, but further enquiries only disclosed the fact that they had gone off in several companies, one taking one route, and another a different one, so that it was most difficult to follow the couple who had held Jack in captivity.

In a few days Mr. Lester returned, and was thankful beyond measure to learn, from a messenger who had been sent to await his arrival, that his son had been found.

He could afford to laugh at Jack for being so foolish as to walk into the trap the gipsy had set for him, now that he was safe and well at The Grange once more.

"But how about the future, my lad?" said Mr. Lester, as he sat talking things over with Jack. "Would you like to go to boarding-school instead of staying here for the rest of the summer?"

"Oh, no, Papa! If Aunt Mary will let me stay I would rather be here. I know I have been very foolish, and I should like to prove to her that I have learned to be a little wiser through this scrape. What do you think, Papa?" he asked.

"Well, my boy, you ought to look at the matter all round before you decide, I think! You see there are the boys at school to be thought of. Schoolboys are not very merciful to each other in the way of chaffing, you know!"

"Well, I deserve to be chaffed over this, and I will try and stand all they can say without losing my temper this time, if you and Aunt will let me try."

"Well, I happen to know that your aunt is very anxious you should stay here until Mamma is well enough to come home, and, in spite of what has happened, I don't think she will send old Robins with you again. The poor old fellow must have had a nice time with you," laughed Mr. Lester, who was really much relieved to find that his sister and his son did not wish to part, although both had made grave mistakes in their treatment of each other.

So Dacre had the pleasure of escorting Jack to school again, and he learned afterwards that the boys had made a self-denying promise that they would not tease him over this visit to the gipsies.

If Miss Lester was anxious about her nephew playing at cricket, and making friends with boys who did not belong to county families, she kept her fears to herself, and never forgot that Jack owed his escape from the gipsies at last to the help of a schoolfellow.

Dacre was a frequent visitor to The Grange, and when Miss Lester discovered how friendless the lad was, she welcomed him the more warmly, and tried to make him feel that he had at least one friend who cared for him, so that the dark cloud of Jack's disappearance proved to have a silver lining in the friendships that grew out of his captivity among the gipsies.

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